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The Endangered and Uncommon Amphibians and Reptiles of Iowa - Turtles

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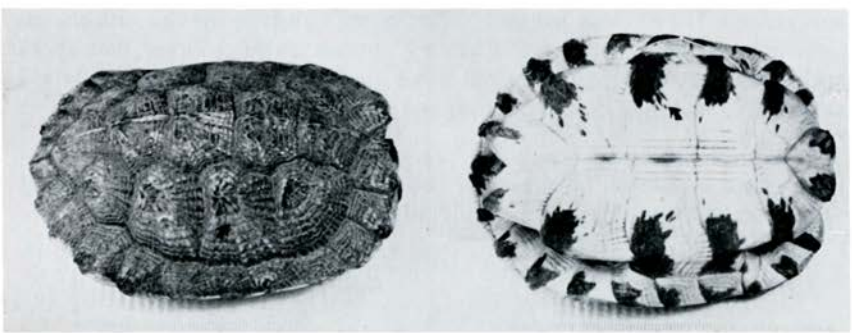
Turtles

Wood Turtle, *Clemmys insculpta*

Recognition

Wood turtles are the most severely endangered of Iowa's amphibians and reptiles. Their strong terrestrial tendencies make them easy prey for people who want a turtle for their backyard. There, improper habitat, diet, and neighborhood cats and dogs usually kill the animal within a year or so. They will be up to 7½ inches long (carapace or upper shell length) and look like the shell was sandblasted out of coarse-grained wood (Figure 11). The plastron (lower shell) is *not* hinged and is bright yellow with a large black spot on each plastral scute (large scale). The dry, sandpaper-like skin of the neck and legs is yellow in young turtles and females, but quite red in older females and mature males. The rough "sand-blasted" pyramids of the carapace easily separate this species from all other Iowa turtles. Snapping turtles have a rough shell but lack the sand-blasted appearance. They also have long tails and a reduced, pale yellow, unspotted plastron. Box turtles are highly terrestrial but have an hinged plastron and smooth shell. Red-eared and Blanding's turtles have yellow plastra with black spots but have smooth shells. Blanding's turtles have a hinged plastron.



Habitat and Potential Distribution

Wood turtles could be found in parts of the eastern half of northern Iowa as shown by Figure 12. They are the most terrestrial of Iowa's aquatic turtles and may occur either in water or on land. Aquatic habitat is limited to woodland pools and quiet portions of rivers in northern Iowa. The chances are that if a specimen is seen coincidentally, it will be wandering through the leafy litter of a woodland within a quarter-mile of a river or pool or will be dead on a highway. Records of this species are so important that dead specimens should be saved regardless of their state of decomposition.

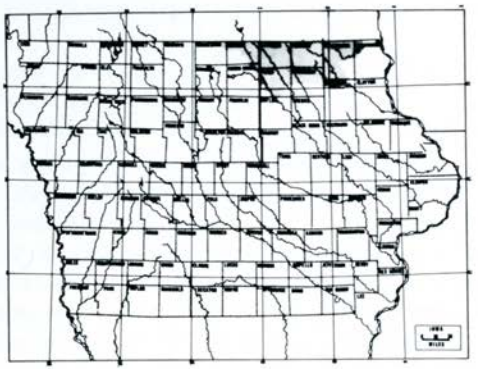


Figure 12. Areas where Wood Turtles might be found.

Ornate Box Turtle, *Terrapene ornata ornata*

Recognition

Ornate box turtles are relatively small (shell to about 5 inches long) with a highly domed carapace and a singly hinged plastron. The carapace is dark brown with bright yellow lines radiating from a single point on each scute (Figure 13). The plastron has a similar pattern of yellow lines on a brown background. The forelegs and neck of mature males will be washed with orange anteriorly and their eyes are red. Blanding's turtles are much larger, have spots rather than lines on the carapace and also a single hinge on the plastron. Wood turtles have no hinge on the plastron and a very rough carapace.

Eastern or three-toed box turtles (*Terrapene carolina*) may also occur in Iowa either as a result of release of pet-store captives or as a few scattered natural populations. These are distinguished by having tan rather than bright yellow lines on the carapace or no lines at all and lack distinct lines on the plastron. The three-toed box turtle has only three toes on the hind feet. We do not have enough data on this species to include it on the endangered list. Any viable records of eastern or three-toed box turtles from Iowa will be of great value.

Figure 13. Ornate Box Turtle, *Terrapene ornata ornata*.

Habitat and Potential Distribution

Sandy areas, especially along Iowa's major rivers, can be expected to support ornate box turtles (Figure 14). These turtles are entirely terrestrial and individuals have drowned after falling into pools of water. They are occasionally killed on highways but are most often seen moving overland near thickets in prairie habitat during summer mornings and evenings. A few relatively strong populations of ornate box turtles survive in Iowa. The loss of habitat has eliminated many more.

Eastern box turtle records for Iowa so far have mostly been in the southeastern quarter of the state. They are less associated with sandy prairie than ornate box turtles but are still found with relatively sandy soil, more often in woodlands.

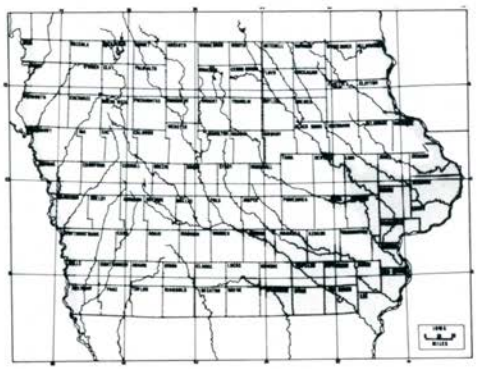


Figure 14. Areas where Ornate Box Turtles might be found.

Blanding's Turtle, *Emydoidea blandingi*

Recognition

Iowa's Blanding's turtles become quite large, attaining shell lengths up to 10¼ inches. They are easily recognized by their highly domed, dark olive brown to blackish carapace peppered with small yellowish-white spots (Figure 15). These markings easily separate Blanding's turtles from all other Iowa species. They are further distinguished by a bright yellow chin and a single well-developed plastral hinge.

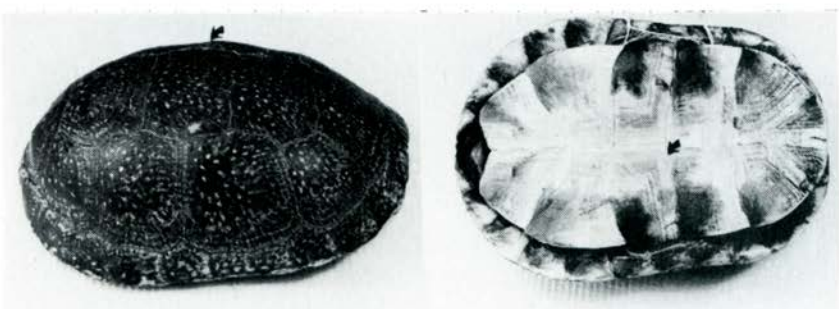


Figure 15. Blanding's Turtle, *Emydoidea blandingi*.

Habitat and Potential Distribution

Natural marshes are almost the only habitat in the state where this species has been consistently found. We have records from gravel pits near marshes, from oxbows of rivers, and from shallow artificially flooded marshes where natural marshes once existed. Records for this species are possible in any part of Iowa except the extreme northwest and southwest (Figure 16).

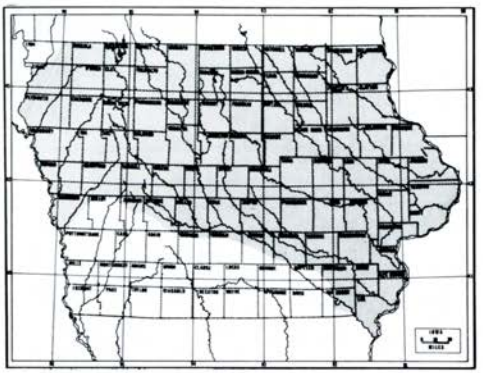


Figure 16. Areas where Blanding's Turtles might be found.

Red-eared Turtle, *Pseudemys scripta elegans*

Recognition

These beautiful turtles are large with a shell length of up to 10½ inches. They have a smooth, only slightly domed brown carapace with faint, fine yellow lines (Figure 17). The carapace of old males loses its yellow lines and becomes intensely blackened, especially along the margins of the scutes. The plastron is unhinged and bright yellow with a black spot in the center of each scute. The plastron of old males may also become mostly black especially around the margins of the scutes. This is the only Iowa turtle with a distinct red-orange spot just posterior to the eye.

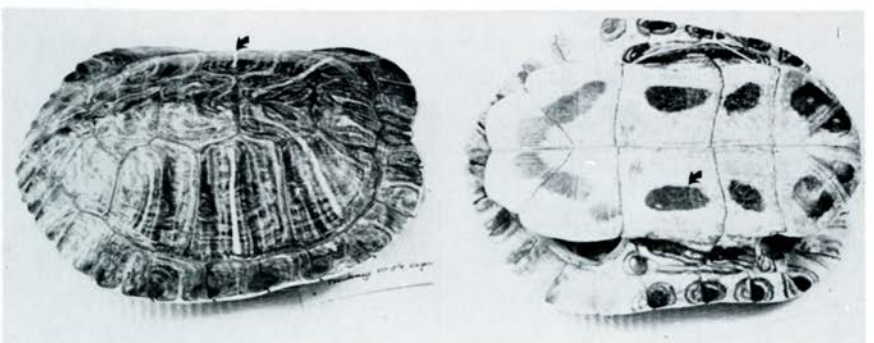


Figure 17. Red-eared Turtle, *Pseudemys scripta elegans*.

Habitat and Potential Distribution

It is possible that red-eared turtles will be found in the Mississippi River nearly to the northern border of Iowa and near the mouth of the largest rivers emptying into the Mississippi. They may occur in quiet pools, oxbows, and nearby ponds several miles upstream along the largest rivers draining into the Mississippi such as the Des Moines or Skunk and may enter Iowa in the southwest in the Nishnabotna or Missouri rivers (Figure 18). It is unlikely that these aquatic turtles will be found dead on highways in Iowa although they do travel some distance from water during nesting. They are not expected in ponds or lakes more than a mile or two from large rivers. Specimens are occasionally caught by anglers and in the nets of commercial fishermen. Commercial fishermen could be an excellent source of data concerning this species.

Figure 18. Areas where Red-eared Turtles might be found.

Stinkpot, *Sternotherus odoratus*

Recognition

Stinkpots are the smallest Iowa turtles, attaining shell lengths of only 4 inches. The smooth shell is a drab brownish gray with very faint brown lines radiating from a central point on each carapacal scute (Figure 19). The head bears a light stripe above and below each eye and is otherwise olive brown. The cream-colored plastron is small with an unusually large amount of skin visible between the scutes and is weakly hinged. The tail of both sexes bears a horny nail. Specimens are often entirely covered with algae. No other Iowa turtle has only two light head stripes or so little ossification of a weakly-hinged plastron.

Figure 19. Stinkpot, *Sternotherus odoratus*.

Habitat and Potential Distribution

Stinkpots are found most often in quiet pools of rivers and large streams where they are often caught by fishermen. They may move into roadside ditches during high water but have not been found in ponds, lakes, or swamps unconnected to rivers in Iowa. They are highly aquatic and rarely stray far from water except to nest, so are not likely to be found in Iowa as road kills. Any inlet, oxbow, or quiet, deep "fishing hole" in southeastern Iowa could support the species (Figure 20). Interviews of fishermen in these areas would be most likely to yield turtles injured by hooks whose survival chances if returned to water would be diminished.

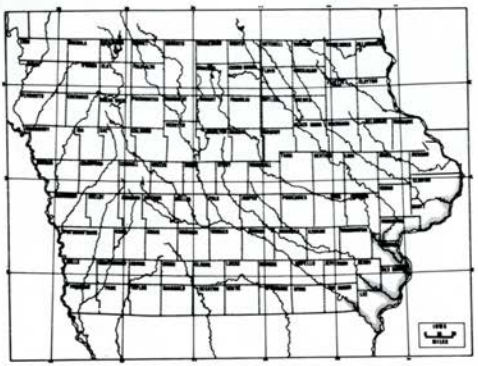


Figure 20. Areas where Stinkpots might be found.

Illinois Mud Turtle, *Kinosternon flavescens spooneri*

Recognition

Illinois mud turtles, like stinkpots, are relatively drab. These have no markings on their brown carapace but sometimes have some brownish pigment on their cream-yellow plastron (Figure 21). They are larger than stinkpots, growing to 5 inches in carapace length. Illinois mud turtles are the only Iowa

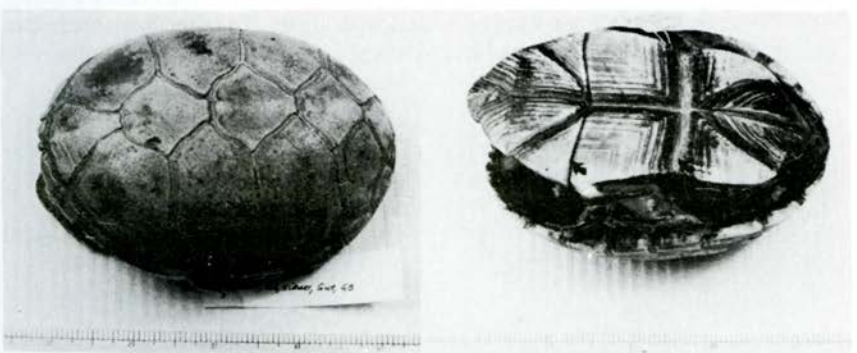


Figure 21. Illinois Mud Turtle, *Kinosternon flavescens spooneri*.

species with a doubly hinged plastron. They are also the only Iowa species other than snapping turtles entirely lacking spots or stripes any place on the shell or soft parts. Snapping turtles are easily distinguished from them by their long tail, reduced unhinged plastron, and much larger size. Some softshell turtles are nearly unspotted but their flexible shell and pointed nose easily distinguish them.

Habitat and Potential Distribution

Even though they are aquatic, Illinois mud turtles require a sandy soft soil around the river inlets, woodland ponds, and marshes where they live. During nesting they move considerable distances from water and are occasionally seen on land at other times of year as well. They could be found on roads and also may be caught by fishermen. This species could occur in suitable sandy habitat anyplace in extreme southeastern Iowa (Figure 22).

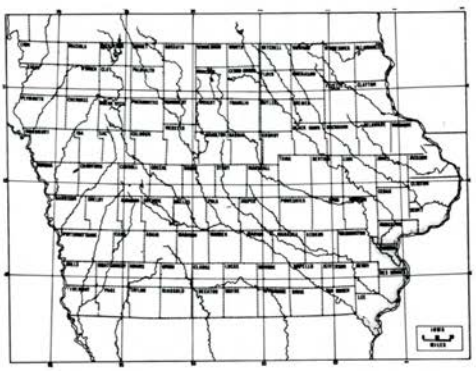


Figure 22. Areas where Illinois Mud Turtles might be found.

Lizards

Five-lined Skink, *Eumeces fasciatus*

Recognition

Five-lined skinks are as much as 3¼ inches long not including the fragile tail. They are glossy black laterally and brown dorsally with 5 distinct yellowish longitudinal stripes (Figure 23). The mid-dorsal stripe is less distinct than the others. The stripes are less intense in old males and their background color is also light. The young have bright blue tails, as do young of all other Iowa lizards. These are the only Iowa lizards with 5 distinct yellowish body stripes. The northern prairie skink is of similar size but lacks the distinct yellow mid-dorsal stripe and has instead three tan dorsal stripes. Their background color tends to be lighter than that of five-lined skinks. Six-lined racerunners have six yellow stripes and dull bead-like scales.